

VZCZCXRO0905
RR RUEHLN RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHDBU #1093/01 2051342
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 241342Z JUL 07
FM AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0693
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 2201
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 2212
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 2170
RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE 2507

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DUSHANBE 001093

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [EAID](#) [EAGR](#) [TI](#)

SUBJECT: TAJIK REGION STILL GRAPPLES WITH POST-WAR DECAY

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11. (SBU) Summary: A July 18 trip to the southern Tajik city of Vakhsh revealed a range of economic problems, including unpaid teachers and impoverished cotton farmers. While thousands fled Vakhsh during the 1992-1997 Tajik civil war, the government has attempted to lure refugees back to the area. However, adverse economic conditions have made it difficult for some of them to stay. Local officials described a close working relationship between the government and active political parties, but requested direct foreign assistance to cotton farmers to offset the current disparity between wealthy creditors and indebted farmers, and to increase the standard of living for the local population. End summary.

ECONOMIC WOES

12. (SBU) Abdujadol Huseinov, Deputy Chairman of Vakhsh district, spoke openly with PolOffs about the magnitude of existing problems in his district, including a lack of money to pay local teachers and old Soviet-era farming equipment which hinders the region's cotton production. While the area received a constant supply of electricity in the summer, during winter months the city only received six hours per day. The seasonal shortages prevented residents from heating their homes in the winter and farmers from taking advantage of mechanization during the cotton harvest. He added that between 35 and 50 percent of the local population worked in cotton production, many receiving extremely low salaries -- when the local government had funds to pay them at all. The local drinking water does not meet acceptable standards; the region's water pipes have not been cleaned or renovated in 20 years, forcing many people to drink river water. Given the number of cows and other animals grazing along this river, the quality ranges from unpotable to dangerous.

13. (SBU) The deputy chairman is desperately attempting to attract foreign investment in the region's cotton industry and asked the U.S. Embassy for help. According to official figures, approximately 15,000 locals have fled to Russia to become migrant workers; however the local government estimated the true numbers to be higher. He argued that if his region were to successfully attract foreign investment, this would improve the local economic situation and standard of living, and produce greater incentive for locals to stay in Vakhsh, rather than flee to Russia to support their families. Local authorities were grateful to the Japanese Embassy, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and U.S.-funded non-governmental organization

Save the Children, all of whom had previously completed renovation projects in Vakhsh. These organizations had also provided training course to local entities. While grateful for this assistance, local officials stated that their true need was additional money and foreign investment. (Comment: This response is discouragingly common in Tajikistan, where many officials view capacity building training programs as less important than new equipment or funds. End Comment.)

STATE OF THE SCHOOLS

¶4. (SBU) PolOffs visited two local schools in austere condition; the ubiquitous holes in windows, cracks in the walls, and drooping ceilings gave the schools the appearance of having survived a recent bombing raid. The school director reported that if the area experienced even a minor earthquake, many area schools would collapse outright. The local government did not have enough money to pay teachers, let alone renovate schools, and had formed a parents' committee to solicit donations for teacher salaries. The number of students now exceeds available school space; and some teachers are holding classes in old train cars in the absence of additional classrooms. A growing number of parents preferred home schooling rather than subjecting their children to these conditions.

¶5. (SBU) A Vakhsh boarding school with 300 students, mainly orphans or children of criminals, was in better physical condition, since the local government subsidized its costs. According to local officials, these students studied for free, and most of them also received a free college education in Dushanbe, Russia or other parts of the former Soviet Union.

EFFECTS OF DISPLACEMENT...

¶6. (SBU) The current population of Vakhsh is 138,000 people. Approximately 90,000 refugees fled Vakhsh during the Tajik civil war. Following the war, the government instituted programs in 1999 and 2001 to attempt to lure Tajik refugees back to their

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homeland; as a result, 15,000 Tajiks returned from Afghanistan, and others returned from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. Approximately 130 Tajiks returned home from Pakistan, where they had been studying at a madrassa. Dismayed at the poor economic conditions, many wanted to return to Pakistan. Approximately 500 Tajiks never came home, and the Tajik government currently considers them "missing." Some fear that they may have joined radical or terrorist groups in Pakistan. While all eight political parties are registered in the region, only three actively work with the population: the Communist Party, President Rahmon's People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan (PDPT) and the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT).

... AND DEBT

¶7. (SBU) Local officials outlined the disparity of wealth between farms associated with futures companies, and those that operate independently. Under current practice, futures companies agree to pay for a certain portion of land, fertilizer, worker salaries, and technical needs to maximize cotton produced on a defined area of land. The futures companies agree to purchase the cotton produced from the land after the harvest at a fixed price, often below the market value. Futures companies force the local farms to purchase their equipment, which puts the farms into debt. However, farms not affiliated with futures companies have less access to credit and older equipment. As a result, the cotton they produce is of poorer quality, which makes it more difficult to sell on the local market. Local officials requested investment for these cotton farms not affiliated with futures companies, to improve the quality of their cotton, and make it easier to sell on the local market.

¶8. (SBU) Comment: Deputy Chairman Huseinov rose to his post in the post-civil war power sharing agreement in which the

government gave 30 percent of jobs to the opposition. While Huseinov is not an Islamic Renaissance Party member, he was connected to former party leader Said Abdullo Nuri. Huseinov also stated that extremism did not exist in his region, since both sides still respect the post civil war accommodation between government and opposition. However, given the existing austere economic conditions, Huseinov is desperately seeking foreign investment to improve the local quality of life -- and to ensure that the local population continues to express peacefully its hopes for a better future. End Comment.

JACOBSON